

## Before and after video art - Television as a subject and material for art around 1963, and a glance at net art since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

There is a kind of professional malaise in art history: it is always trying to find the absolute, the very beginning, e.g. the first abstract picture, the first absolute film, or indeed the first art video. But art does not develop like that: abstraction emerged simultaneously in several places in Europe around 1910. A decade later, *Walter Ruttman*, *Viking Eggeling*, *Marcel Duchamp* and *Hans Richter* were working on so-called absolute films, usually without being aware of each other.

The same applies to the history of technology, incidentally. Photography and the electric telegraph were developed by several inventors at the same time around 1840. And *Graham Bell* registered his patent for the telephone on 14 February 1876 only two hours before his competitor *Elisha Gray*.

In the case of video art, art history's saviour seems to be the history of technology: an art video could not exist without a video recorder – so here at least it must be possible to fix a definite start in relation to the production medium. But the opposite is the case: the (pre-)history of what we now call video art begins, as can be read in almost all the standard works, around 1963, in other words two years before the first Sony VCRs were available. *Nam June Paik* and *Wolf Vostell* are mentioned as competitors here in almost all texts when discussing the question »who was the first?«<sup>2</sup>

This essay presents the results of my research about this period of beginnings around 1963, results that surprised me as well. Artists start working with television images with remarkable simultaneity around 1962–64, as can be seen from the examples in the next section. Hence the term video art is not appropriate here either, it is about the electronic television image and its power as a mass medium. This also applies to the early years of artistic work with video, while throughout the 1960s television was usually the reference point. This is borne out by the titles of the first major exhibitions in 1969: »TV as a creative medium« (Howard Wise Gallery New York) and »Vision and Television« (Rose Art Museum, Waltham/Ma)

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the previously published essay *Television – art or anti-art? Conflict and co-operation between the avant-garde and the mass media in the 1960s/70s*; it should not be read as identical with the earlier piece, but as a Meta Text, sharpened in terms of its thesis, relating to the period of the 60s/70s, which

was comprehensively researched there. (See: Rudolf Frieling, Dieter Daniels, *Medien Kunst Netz 1: Medienkunst im Überblick / Media Art Net 1: Survey of Media Art*, Vienna/New York: Springer Verlag, 2004 and online: [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/medienkunst\\_im\\_ueberblick/massenmedien/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/medienkunst_im_ueberblick/massenmedien/))

and the magazine *Art in America* called its special issue »TV – The next Medium« for this reason. *Gerry Schum*'s »Fernsehgalerie« (Television Gallery) had its first broadcast in 1969 as well, and in the USA the program created by artists »The Medium is the Medium« was broadcast on *WHGB-TV*. So in the late 60s as well things happened surprisingly at the same time, as was also the case for the period around 1963, which is to be investigated below.

Before I start looking at the individual artists and works in the early 1960s I would like to refer briefly to the intellectual context of contemporary media theory. Here too the social influence of television is a key theme, and media theory came into being at almost the same time as the artistic positions presented here. *Marshall McLuhan* prophesied that the audio-visual media would bring about the end of the Gutenberg age in »Understanding Media« in 1964. This thesis made him a media star in his own right, and he was able to illustrate and give evidence for it in his frequent radio and television appearances. He made some bold parallels with art: according to *McLuhan*, the mosaic image of the TV screen demands that viewers take an active role when viewing – just as modern art does. »TV is the Bauhaus program of design and living, or the Montessori educational strategy, given total technological extension and commercial sponsorship. The aggressive lunge of artistic strategy for the remaking of Western media has, via TV, become a vulgar sprawl and an overwhelming splurge in American life.«<sup>3</sup>

In 1963, *Umberto Eco* devoted the conclusion of his book about the »open work of art« to television experiences with live broadcasts, where he sees a structural relationship with the non-predetermined »open« art forms of his day. An artistic »alienation« of live TV seems like a »surprising break in passive attention, as a challenge to judgement – or at least as an incentive towards liberation from the seductive power of television.«<sup>4</sup> Here he is precisely formulating the aims that artists were soon to be trying out practically with their TV experiments.

Like the commercial American and the public European media systems, these two theories cast art in different roles: for *McLuhan*, media-technical progress essentially defines the development of art, in that it makes new presentation forms feasible that had hitherto been available only to artists' imaginations. But for *Eco*, art offers a model for a self-determined alternative to possession by the power of the media. This difference is typical of the different views of television in the USA and Europe, which also characterize artistic approaches.

<sup>2</sup> There were some artistic attempts to work with television even in the 1950s, cf. for *Lucio Fontana* (1952) and *George Brecht* (1959): Dieter Daniels (as in note 1) p. 22 and p. 43, note. 28, Engl: p. 31 and p. 66, note 28

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*, London/New York: Rontledge, an imprint of

Taylor & Francis Books Ltd., 2001 (first 1964), p. 351.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 211 (Umberto Eco, »The Open Work«, trans: Anna Cacogni, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1989)

## I: Examples of artistic television works 1962-1964

## Paik's Participation TV



Figure 01 Nam June Paik, Invitation for the »Exposition of Music, Electronic Television«, 1963

The most eminent example is *Paik*'s first major exhibition »Exposition of Music – Electronic Television«. It took place from 11 to 20 March 1963 in the Wuppertal architect *Jährling*'s private *Galerie Parnass*. The title alone shows the transition from *Paik* the musician to *Paik* the pictorial artist. The exhibition was distributed all over the building and even spilled over into the private rooms. Visitors at the time often took scant notice of the room containing 12 modified TV sets. *Paik* had worked on these second-hand televisions of different makes and ages for over a year in his studio so that the public could manipulate the TV image while it was running – thus demonstrating his Utopia of »participation TV« for the first time. He kept these experiments under wraps until the exhibition, well aware that an idea like this can easily be stolen.



Figure 02 Paik and Karl Otto Götz with the Kuba TV at the »Exposition of Music, Electronic Television« 1963 (Photo Manfred Leve)

The complex project also included: four prepared pianos, several disc and tape installations, mechanical sound objects and a freshly slaughtered ox's head above the entrance. The exhibition was open for 10 days only, for two hours in the evening from half past seven to half past nine. »Practically no one but the participants' friends came to

the opening, and almost no one at all on the other evenings», *Tomas Schmit* reported; he had been involved in the show's installation.<sup>5</sup> Even so, this exhibition's twenty hour lifespan made 1963 into zero hour for the history of video art – and that is true even though no video equipment was used here. *Paik* once confided in me that the evening opening times were intended to fit in with the times at which the then only German television channel was broadcast, as that was the only time an image, albeit modified, could be seen on the TV sets.<sup>6</sup> This shows how important these experiments, scarcely acknowledged by visitors and the press, were for *Paik* himself.

#### Vostell's TV Decollage



Figure 03 Wolf Vostell, »Television Decollage«, 1963

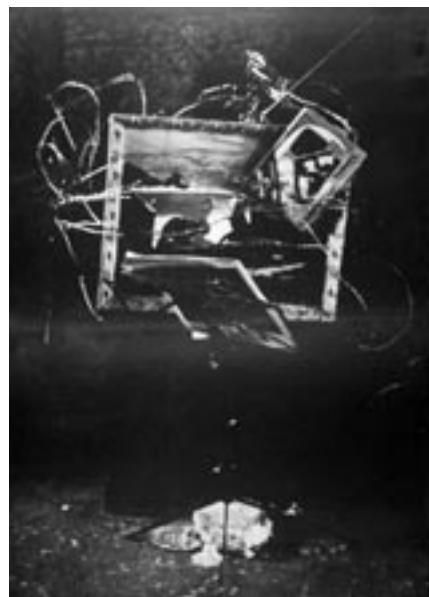


Figure 04 Wolf Vostell, »TV Burial«, 1963 (photo: Peter Moore)

*Vostell's* first public show of TV works took place from 22 May to 8 June 1963 in New York, only two months after *Paik's* Wuppertal project – and undoubtedly more strategically located in the world-renowned art metropolis. The exhibition, similarly to *Paik's*, consisted of several sections, which *Vostell* lists as follows: »6 television sets with various programs / the picture is decollaged, 6 fusions / pots with plastic aeroplanes that melt in the heat - 6 grilled chickens on a canvas / to be eaten by the public from the picture - 6 Chicken Incubators / on canvas /

<sup>5</sup> Tomas Schmit, »Exposition of Music«, in: Nam June Paik, Werke 1946 – 76, Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein 1976, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation between the author and Paik, New York 1999.  
<sup>7</sup> Otto F. Walter/Helmut Heissenbüttel (ed.), *Vostell, Happening & Leben*, Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970, p. 293.

the chicken should hatch on the day of the exhibition - everyone receives an ampoule of liquid he can use to smudge magazines.«<sup>7</sup> The said ampoule of solvents was handed out to visitors at the opening, and photographs show that this offer of »Do it yourself Dé-collage« of magazines hanging on the wall was enthusiastically received.

Much has been written about the question of priority for *Paik* or *Vostell*.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately *Vostell* has his own somewhat exaggerated assertions to thank for the fact that he usually comes off badly in the eyes of progressive critics. He once said: »I am the first artist in the world who has been using television sets for images since 1958.«<sup>9</sup> And yet he did some important things, and some unique things as well: the Happening »Nein – 9 Decollagen«, for example, which was organized as a bus trip, also in 1963, but now in Wuppertal. Participants were taken into a cinema where a film showing a TV-Decollage was running, accompanied by howling sirens, while people lay motionless on the floor of the cinema. This film, »Sun in your head«, can count as the first artistic work using recorded moving television images.

Research usually concentrates on juxtaposing *Paik* and *Vostell*, but this contrast can be placed in a different context by other examples. Some of the following works have been familiar for some time, others are trouvailles from my own research.

#### Tom Wesselmann



Figure 05 Tom Wesselmann, »Stillife #28«, 1963

<sup>8</sup> Edith Decker has undertaken a great deal of research on the question of Paik – Vostell priority, and it reads like an artistic thriller. Cf. Edith Decker, *Paik. Video, Cologne: DuMont*, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Vostell in 1977 in: William Furlong, *Audio Arts*, Leipzig 1992, p. 64.

Tom Wesselmann built working TV sets into some of his Pop Art paintings in 1962/63. The best known is the 1963 »Still Life # 28«. The picture is crammed with American symbolism, and the portrait of *President Lincoln* on the wall relates to the topical events on the screen. *Wesselmann* shows television as part of American everyday life, as something that people do not watch with close attention, but that is on in the background and is just as much part of the interior as the furniture and the pictures on the wall. Even then there were several programs being broadcast all day in the USA, so that *Wesselmann*'s image almost always ›works‹. This is the only example of a TV program being integrated into a work of art unaltered, as a readymade, and *Wesselmann* does so without any Utopian or critical counter-designs.

#### Günther Uecker



Figure 06 Günther Uecker, »TV with nails«, 1963

In the same year, 1963, *Günther Uecker* processed a TV set, »TV 1963«, by covering it with nails – over-nailing – as well as painting it white. The object is part of an exhibition called »Sintflut der Nägel« (Great Flood of Nails) in which *Uecker* over-nailed all the furniture in a living-room. A TV broadcast by the *Hessischer Rundfunk* accompanying the exhibition showed *Uecker* buying the brand-new television set, and then subjecting this valuable object to artistic treatment.<sup>10</sup> Thus television as a consumer fetish becomes an object reminiscent of primitive rituals, of the kind found in African nail fetishes, for example.

<sup>10</sup> Exhibition in Rochus Kowallek's »d« gallery, Frankfurt 1963. *Uecker* says that he produced three processed televisions at this time, and also a piano. Using the principle of

nailing over them, and in some cases painting them white as well. (*Uecker* in a telephone conversation with the author on 20.8.1996).

#### César

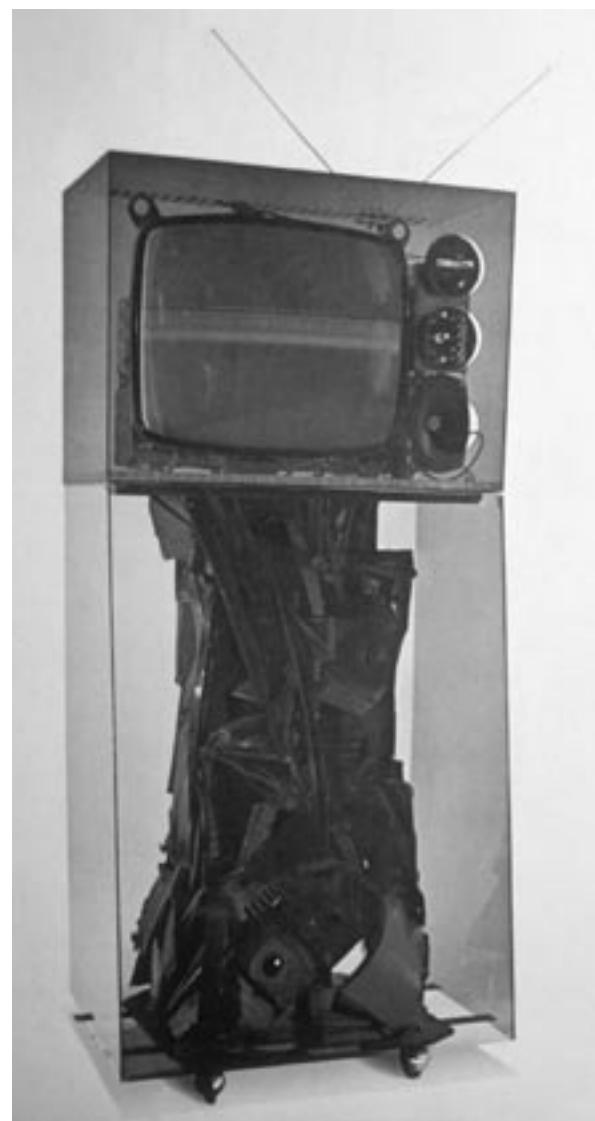


Figure 07 César (César Baldaccini), »Télévision«, 1962

*César* also uses a television set sculpturally in his piece »Télévision« in 1962. He strips a television of its casing and places it on a scrap sculpture. The whole thing is covered with a perspex hood, with holes for the aerial, loudspeaker and operating knobs. The idea of the ready-made is transferred to the wonders of modern civilization, entirely in the spirit of *Pierre Restany*'s »Nouveau Réalisme manifesto«.

### Isidore Isou



Figure 08 Isidore Isou, »La télévision déchiquetée ou l'anti-crétinisation«, (»Jagged Television or Anti-Cretinization«), 1962, reconstruction 1989

A TV object by *Isidore Isou*, the founder of lettrism, dates from the same year, 1962; it is called : »La télévision déchiquetée ou l'anti-crétinisation«. (The jagged television or anti-cretinization). Lettrism is a movement that has been somewhat unjustly forgotten. In the early 1950s, it anticipated many developments that did not occur until the 1960s in conceptual and inter-media art. Isou proclaimed the destruction of the film in 1951, actually implementing this with a montage film and thus causing the scandal that brought the young Guy Debord to lettrism.<sup>11</sup> The movement was best known for lettrist hypergraphics, a set of meaningless signs that anticipated the development of comics and advertising in many ways. In his TV object, Isou puts a template of such hypergraphic elements over the screen. This simple gesture makes the TV screen into a reservoir of constantly new signs, created by overlapping the hypergraphic matrix and the moving image. A key fact is that both *César* and *Isou* exhibited their TV objects in Paris in March 1962.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For the lettrist films and their pioneering role see Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces. Von Dada bis Punk*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996, p. 312ff.; Roberto Ohr, *Phantom Avantgarde*: Edition Nautilus, Hamburg 1990, p. 27ff.

<sup>12</sup> Isou's TV object »was shown in the Paris Museum of Modern Art and then destroyed.« Jean-Paul Curtay (ed.), *Lettrism and Hypergraphics – The Unknown Avant-Garde, 1949 – 1985*, New York: Franklin Furnace, 1985. Césars

TV-Objekt was also shown in Paris in March 1962 in the »Antagonismes II – l'objet« exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Edith Decker (1988, p. 48, p.57) shows that Vostell visited this show and saw César's TV object there.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in: Johannes Gfeller, »Frühes Video in der Schweiz«, in: Georges-Bloch, *Jahrbuch des Kunstschriftlichen Seminars der Universität Zürich*, 1997, p. 224f. Gfeller provides a comprehensively researched account of Gerstner's TV works.

### Karl Gerstner



Figure 09 Karl Gerstner »Auto-Vision«, 1964.



Figure 10 Karl Gerstner »Auto-Vision«, 1964, detail: Wavy Lens, Concentric Prisms.

Figure 11 Karl Gerstner: stills from the film demonstrating Auto-vision, 1964

The Swiss artist, graphic designer and advertising expert *Karl Gerstner* changed the TV image in a much more complex visual way. He developed various models of his »Auto-Vision« from 1962/63: »The name identifies the difference from television: the aim is not to broadcast programs, but to create programs directly. For this we use daily television programs that are abstracted through a »pair of spectacles«, and alienated to the point of being non-representational,« is Gerstner's comment on the process.<sup>13</sup> These »spectacles« in moulded perspex (Plexiglas), related to Op Art, can be swapped around, and each pair creates a different effect.

The object, put together with designer perfection, would have fitted in well at the time with progressive home design à la *Verner Panton*. But *Gerstner* is not just interested in superficial effects. He explains in an elaborate film including a demonstration of the work that he sees his »direct program creation method« as a substitute for manipulating images digitally, which the computer could not do at that time. Two working examples of »Auto-Vision« have survived, unlike *Paik's* and *Vostell's* early TV works, which have disappeared, but they have been largely ignored in the history of video art.

#### TV representations in painting, photography, object art and action art

As well as the pieces that integrate or manipulate the television as a functioning object, there are of course numerous examples of television appearing in painting and also providing a subject for photography, object art, and action art.

#### Painting: Paul Thek

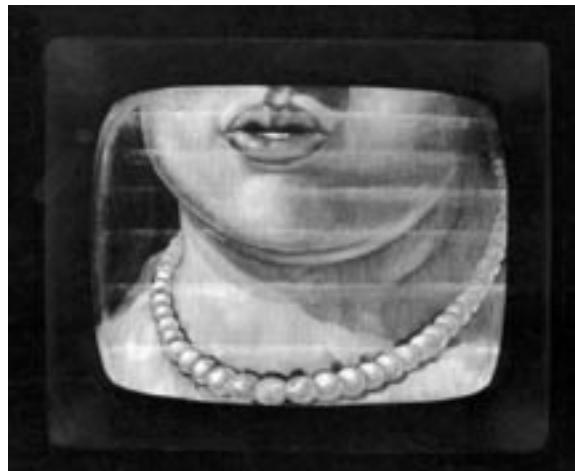


Figure 12 Paul Thek, excerpt from the series »Television/Analyzation«, 1963, (Photo: D. James Dee)

I will single out just *Paul Thek* as a representative for representing television in painting or collages. He painted perhaps the most lucid and radical picture of this kind in 1963 in his »Television Analyzations« series, in which the box completely fills the canvas with a detail of a face.

<sup>14</sup> See Lars Blunck, Between Object & Event. Partizipationskunst zwischen Mythos und Teilhabe, Weimar: VDG-Verlag, 2003, p. 189.

<sup>15</sup> See Lee Friedlander, The little screens, San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2001.

#### Object: Edward Kienholz



Figure 13 Edward Kienholz, »Instant On«, 1964.

In his 1964 sculpture »Instant on«, based on a portable television, *Kienholz* provides a critical analysis of TV images of *John F. Kennedy*'s assassination in the previous year. The title is ambiguous: it describes the new TV technology which manages without the old warming up period required by valves – and also stands for direct participation via TV in current world events. So viewers can use the on/off switch on the object to switch on a light that makes an image of the fatal shot at *Kennedy* appear in the cross hairs. Thus spectators are made into co-culprits symbolically, sharing the marksman's perspective via a mass medium.<sup>14</sup>

#### Photography: Lee Friedlander, Dennis Hopper

TV is also a subject for photography. Also in 1963, the American photographer *Lee Friedlander* examined the relationship between the television screen and the domestic interior in a series of pictures.<sup>15</sup> And in the same year the actor and artist *Dennis Hopper* photographed the »Kennedy Suite« series, which focuses even more sharply on the TV screen as a principal theme.

## Action Art

Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg staged »Leben mit Pop. Eine Demonstration für den Kapitalistischen Realismus« (Living with Pop. A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism) in a Düsseldorf furniture store in 1963. The artists themselves sit motionless on the available furniture »like sculptures on pedestals, their natural distances apart increased to give a sense of being on show«.<sup>16</sup> The television is also on, showing the news punctually at 8 p.m., as the action begins.

In the 1963 happening »Push and Pull«, Allan Kaprow also invites visitors into a furniture arrangement with a television showing a program in it, but here it is up to the visitors themselves to create new constellations.



Figure 14 Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg, »Living with Pop. A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism«, 1963 in a department store, Düsseldorf.

<sup>16</sup> Concept of the action in: Gerhard Richter, Text, Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag, 1994, p. 15.

## III Theses

The central thesis arising from these examples is: The history of media art is not prescribed by the technological history of the media. If the time is ripe for a subject, artists do not wait until the media industry provides the right equipment for them. On the contrary, they take up methods and resources in order to formulate their statements – by processing the media material both really (realistically) and symbolically (and in the case of television this is in fact happening surprisingly late). The range extends from the modified TV set via film, photography, object and painting and on to action, even before video becomes available as a medium from 1965.

Rather than a source of Utopian hope, most 1960s artists saw television as unduly powerful and as an objective for attacks whose widespread media effect made the pictorial world of art seem insignificant. And yet there were an astonishing number of attempts to redefine television, and there are various approaches to demonstrate this, going back well before the beginning of video art. Here distinctions can be made between:

- Firstly the critical and aggressive positions (*Vostell, Isou, Uecker*) aimed at destroying the media apparatus. The domestic television set is used as a representative-victim for an attack on the entire system of television as a broadcasting institution.
- Secondly the neutral and contemplative approach (*Wesselmann, César, Friedlander, Richter/Lueg*), which accepts the running program as an unchangeable fact and places it in the context of its own image-finding process.
- Thirdly the constructive-productive method, represented above all by *Gerstner* and *Paik*. They design models for work with the electronic image as artistic material, which already point forward to later video and computer art. *Paik* is the first and only artist to intervene in the electronics at this stage, so that an image can be formed at source. His vision is: »As collage technique replaced oil-paint, the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas.«<sup>17</sup> And *Paik* is the only artist named here who then worked consistently with video from 1965.

The synchronicity with which artists started to work with television as a medium in 1962/63 remains surprising. One key fact is that the artists started to work with TV on the basis of different genres:

- *Paik* comes from music, *Vostell* and *Wesselmann* from painting, *César, Uecker* and *Kienholz* see the TV above all as a sculptural object, *Gerstner* uses it as a source of optical signals, *Isou*'s starting points are film and literature. The new medium is at a point of intersection

<sup>17</sup> Nam June Paik, »Electronic Videorecorder«, flyer from 1965, reprinted in Rudolf Frieling/Daniels, *Media Art Action. The 1960s and 1970s in Germany*, Vienna/New York: Springer Verlag, 1997, pp. 130 – 131

between the traditional disciplines. So the artistic »re-conquest« of television is nothing less than the start of video art fixated on one medium – it is at the point of intersection of the new interdisciplinary direction taken in the 1960s, working towards removing the boundaries between genres and the cultural institutions linked with that.

#### IV Parallels with net art

Finally I would like to leap forward to the 1990s and examine parallels with the history of net art. The same mistaken judgement is being made about net art as was made about video art: that this art did not come into being until the introduction of the Internet and above all of the World Wide Web. Thus for the time being it becomes the latest genre defined by a medium, the first one being video art in its day.

This is relatively easy to disprove through the almost thirty-year history of telecommunication art, which was using electronic networks as early as the 1970s. And the early 1990s saw projects like »The Thing« or »Handshake«, which saw themselves as a social art form, still functioning independently of the Internet technically, but already anticipating the idea of a networked community.

The great difference is that the Net is seen as something in its own right, as an autonomous medium for self-creation – while television confronts artists around 1963 as the total Other, something alien, that they have no influence on at first. In fact, as a result of the boom in the mid nineties, the Internet was to develop into a mass medium of this kind, in which art is forced on to the periphery. This monopolization became the subject of artistic net criticism from 1995. A transformation of this kind from Utopia to Dystopia took place in the reverse direction in the 1960s, when video technology seemed to make the idea of autonomously created artists' television viable from 1965.

This brings me finally to the extent to which such art can be documented. As I have shown, early TV art is comprehensible only in the context of the specific state of development of television. This is demonstrated by the fact that *Paik's* Wuppertal exhibition was only open for two hours a day because of the thin German broadcasting program – and in contrast with this, *Wesselmann's* American TV still life was able to run all day. As I have said, this difference between Europe and the USA is also mirrored in contemporary media theories by *Umberto Eco* and *McLuhan*.

The greatest common feature with net art in the early 1990s lies in this dependence from context, and it is comprehensible only against the background of the ultra-rapid development of the associated media. A project like »The Thing« emerged in 1991 as a self-defining communication community beyond all control. Then from the mid 1990s, many Net Artworks are to be understood only as criticism of control and commercialization of the Internet. (E.g. »<http://www.antworten.de>« by *Holger Friese* and *Max Kossatz* 1997 and »Dump your Trash« by *Blank&Jeron* and *Heath Bunting's* »\_readme (Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible)«, both dating from 1998.) Like the TV interventions of the early 1960s, they do not so much create media works, but model media modifications, responding to the overall situation of the realtion between medium and society. The question of the extent to which such art can be documented is thus not restricted to the work as such, but would actually have to reflect on the context of the medium at this time and on its social functions. Rather than mentioning the site-specificity that is usual in art history, here we can speak of time-specificity for these works, which change their meaning and their mode of functioning crucially through the rapid development of their media surroundings. This also applies incidentally to the above-mentioned television works, which relate to a particular situation in the medium: a linear perception which took place at the time without program zapping, a simple pictorial language, without electronic experiments, but with slow editing sequences. In addition, the technical manipulations that *Paik* carried out would no longer work for today's TV sets. But all the works named would show a completely different sequence of images with today's television programs.

Finally I would like to ask that terms like video art or net art should always be used as tools, and not as genre concepts. Unfortunately it is often forgotten that these terms are auxiliary constructions, trying to describe an artistic approach by means of a technical category. The following paradox shows how stubborn such coined terms are: today from a technical point of view, video as a medium has long been subsumed in a digital-multimedia context. In artistic terms, almost nobody would like to be called a »video artist« anymore, because you are either a media artist or a fine artist who occasionally works with video. But it is only now that (still so-called) video art is celebrating success on the art market – and it is only now becoming acceptable in art history as a subject for academic seminars and writings. But if one considers artists' dealings with the electronic image as a leitmotif from 1962 to the present day, then perhaps »video art« never existed.

*Translation: Michael Robinson*